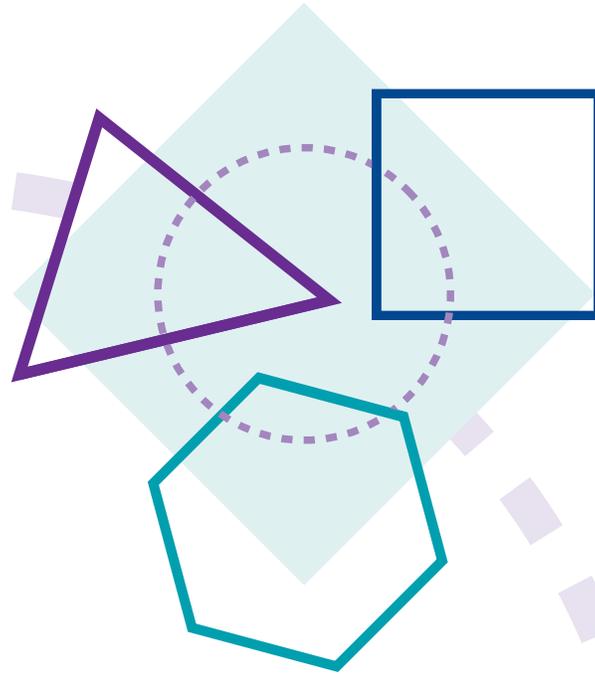


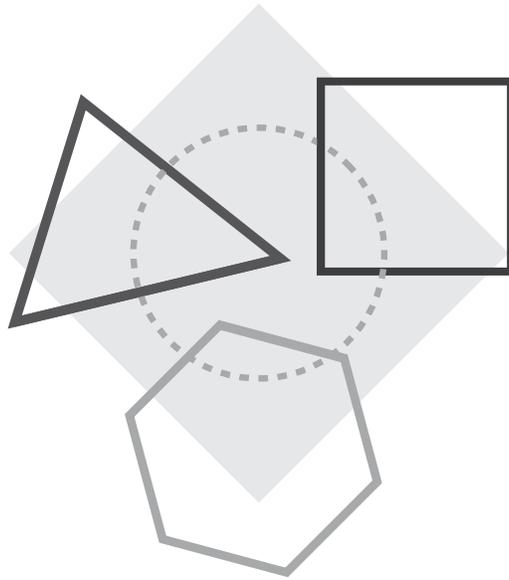
Forging New Collaborations Between Domestic Violence Programs, Child Welfare Services and Communities of Color



*A Report from the Focus Groups
Conducted by the Women of Color Network (WOCN)*

Author
Nita Carter
WOCN Project Manager

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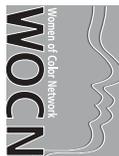
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Forging New Collaborations Between Domestic Violence Programs, Child Welfare Services and Communities of Color

A Report from the Focus Groups Conducted by the Women of Color Network

Whenever two issues converge, new challenges emerge in discussion and certainly in developing strategies. This is especially true with topics as complex as domestic violence and child welfare. To adequately address these issues one must include in their analysis issues like poverty, family formation, child protection, employment, housing, welfare, child care and health care, all issues that affect the safety and self sufficiency of battered women with children. The issue becomes even more complex when one examines how these issues affect women from racial and ethnic communities and begins to explore developing strategies to address their needs. What role does race and culture play and how does racism affect a woman's ability to access and utilize systems?

Although domestic violence occurs across all classes and races, literature suggests that women from communities of color experience more barriers to accessing and utilizing the systems in place to respond to domestic violence and child abuse. Poor women of color are likely to encounter even more barriers to keeping their families intact and becoming self-sufficient. They often encounter systems that discriminate against them and may not provide them with information on services that could help in their journey to become self-sufficient. For example, a study done at the Virginia Initiative for Employment not Welfare (VIEW), found that 59% of White respondents in the program reported that their caseworker was helpful in notifying them of jobs, while only 36% of Black respondents were notified. In addition, 41% of White respondents reported that their VIEW caseworker encouraged them to increase their educational status while [astonishingly] none of the Black respondents reported their VIEW caseworker encouraged them to pursue or complete an education. Furthermore, 47% of White program participants were offered discretionary transportation assistance by their VIEW caseworkers, while (none) 0% of the Black program participants were offered any transportation assistance¹.

In reviewing domestic violence and child welfare services, a pattern of additional barriers was revealed for women from racial and ethnically diverse communities. For example, the removal of children by the child welfare system has historically been racially disproportionate creating a climate of fear and distrust of these systems. While many racial and ethnic communities have at some point in American history experienced periods in time when their children were disproportionately removed, African American and Native American children appear to have suffered from this practice the most. In 1999, of the 568,000 children in foster care:

- 36% were White non-Hispanic
- 42% were Black
- 15% were Hispanic
- 7% were other races/ethnic origins

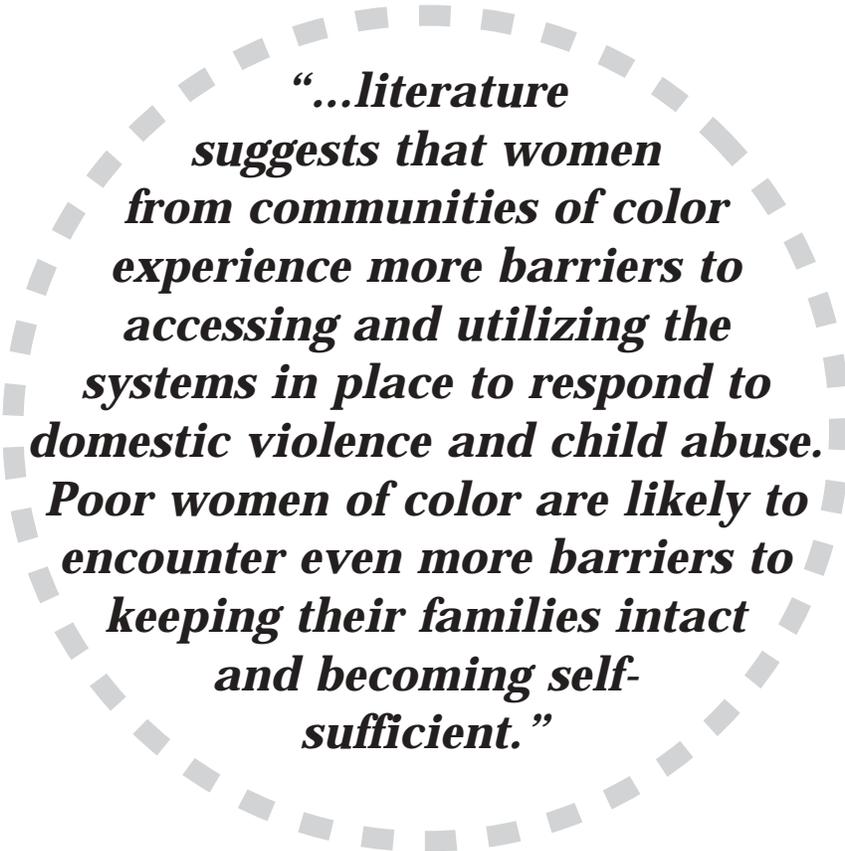
¹ Gooden, Susan, T. (1998), All things Not Being Equal: Differences in Caseworker Support Toward Black and White Welfare Clients. Harvard Journal of African American Public Policy, Volume 1V.

Of the 122,000 children who exited foster care during the second half of 1999:

- 45% were White
- 33% were Black
- 13% were Hispanic
- 9% were other races/ethnic origins²

Through the 50's and 60's it was commonplace for Native American children to be removed and sent to boarding schools or placed with families outside of their culture.

Few domestic violence programs provide long term solutions and follow-up services to assist battered women through the process of becoming self-sufficient. Thus, many battered women with children are left to fend for themselves once the immediate crisis is over. Often times, for battered women with children from racial and ethnic communities, this results in engaging in systems where there are high levels of mistrust, stereotyping and confusion about the process and their rights, often with no one there to represent their interests. Therefore, it seems reasonable to pursue a dialogue on how domestic violence and child protection services agencies can best collaborate when engaging women from racial and ethnic communities. It also seems reasonable that women from racial and ethnic communities should be at the forefront of these dialogues. If we are to truly develop new strategies that reach out to those from the racial and ethnic underserved communities we know exist, women, men, battered women, service providers, leaders and organizations from these communities must be included in our dialogues and strategy development.



“...literature suggests that women from communities of color experience more barriers to accessing and utilizing the systems in place to respond to domestic violence and child abuse. Poor women of color are likely to encounter even more barriers to keeping their families intact and becoming self-sufficient.”

² National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse, (2001), Foster Care National Statistics, website publication.

RATIONALE

The Women of Color Network (WOCN), a project of the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, a national grassroots initiative, is designed to support and promote the leadership of women of color activists and the development of culturally-specific programs addressing domestic and sexual violence. WOCN's constituency is primarily domestic violence and sexual assault activists from racial and ethnic communities. Many work directly with battered and assaulted women from racial and ethnic communities. Some are exploring or developing services that are more culturally-relevant and responsive to the needs of women from their communities. It has been our experience that these women of color service providers are the experts when it comes to developing services for battered and assaulted women from their communities. They know their community, have a commitment to their community, understand domestic violence and sexual assault and see many battered women of color with children who are a part of the child welfare system and women of color with children who are not. They are also aware of those women from their communities who choose not to utilize domestic violence services and the need to design services with them in mind. Utilizing WOCN's constituency presented a rare opportunity to engage women of color working in the field of domestic violence and sexual assault at the local and state level in the growing dialogue around child welfare and domestic violence collaborations.

WOCN partnered with the National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV) to develop goals for this project entitled Child Welfare and Domestic Violence. The Child Welfare and Domestic Violence Project had two main goals:

- To provide an opportunity for women of color working in the field of domestic violence at the local and state level to participate in the growing dialogue around how to provide effective services to battered and assaulted women with children and;
- To gather information from these service providers about what types of interventions they would like to see developed to respond to the needs of battered women with children from racial and ethnic communities.

Presently, there are several national initiatives such as the Green Book written by Susan Schechter and Jeffery Edelson, and produced by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges that have prompted thought and debate on the overlap of domestic violence and child maltreatment. The U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services responded to this book by supporting six demonstration sites across the country to test the recommendations set forth in the Green Book. Additionally, the Family Violence Prevention Fund, along with the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges and the National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators have been working in states and communities across the country to improve the institutional and community responses to families who experience domestic violence when children are at risk of harm. However, none of these initiatives have adequately addressed the question of how these collaborations will address the needs of battered women and children from racial and ethnic communities. Some questions for further exploration might include:

- What might these collaborations look like, if they were effectively working with battered and assaulted women from communities of color?
- Who should the partners be?
- How should the collaboration be structured when the consumers are women from racial and ethnic communities, immigrant women, women who do not speak English?

WOCN sought to provide more insight into these questions through this project.

DATA COLLECTION METHOD

Focus Group Participants

Over 100 women of color activists participated in the project. Responses from 92 women and men were used to compile data for this report. Respondents were 90 women and 2 men of color who represented a wide range of American culture. Approximately 60% of the respondents identified themselves as African American, while Latinos represented 19% of the respondents, Asian American at 11% and Native American at 7%. The remaining participants described themselves as Jewish or others. Geographically, the participants were from 30 states: Arkansas, Alabama, California, Connecticut, Florida, Idaho, Illinois, Kansas, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington D.C., Wisconsin and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The participants were a mix of women of color services providers working in local domestic violence programs, state domestic violence and sexual assault coalitions, sexual assault programs, community-based programs (non-domestic violence or sexual assault), and local child protection agencies.

Process

The data for this project was collected at three intervals. The initial data collection occurred at a meeting conducted by WOCN in September 2002 in Columbus, Ohio. Twenty-seven activists from racial and ethnic communities working in the fields of domestic violence, sexual assault and child welfare, with experience in both domestic violence and child welfare, convened in Columbus Ohio for a two-day meeting. To ensure adequate representation from state domestic violence coalitions, NNEDV assisted in the selection of participants for this meeting. In November 2002, data collection continued in Miami, Florida, at WOCN's Leadership Institute Part II and in Green Bay, Wisconsin, at WOCN's Second Leadership Institute Training. All three groups were provided with brief survey questionnaires designed mainly to facilitate discussions on relevant topics. Responses were captured in four ways – flip charts, hand-written notes, tape recorded sessions, and written responses from participants. The qualitative method used to gather data was particularly effective in this regard because the significance of findings were based not on a statistical test, but rather on a trained expert's ability to find meaning in complex interaction through observation and analysis.

The findings documented in this report represent dominant themes collected at all three data collection intervals. These themes are documented by quoting the participants' remarks (*italicized text*) and selecting illustrative events recorded in the notes.

LIMITATIONS OF PROJECT

There exists the possibility of writer bias, which would affect validity of the findings. In addition, a larger sample size and the use of quantitative research methods would be of value to extend these findings. Sexual assault providers were present; however, no questions to separate out the issue and address differences were included. Respondents were mostly African American. For further exploration the project could be repeated to include more voices of women from other racial and ethnic groups not represented, i.e. African immigrants for example Somali populations, Caribbean, larger representation of Native Americans etc.

RESULTS

There was little difference in what respondents saw as issues and barriers to seeking and utilizing services for battered women than already discussed in previous literature and projects addressing domestic violence and child abuse. Those participating in the project identified the following needs:

- increased collaboration between the systems
- additional cross-training of workers from domestic violence and child welfare on delivery of culturally-relevant services
- expanded outreach and education about programs and services
- continuation of systems advocacy
- more supportive services to address the needs (such as housing, transportation, child care and health care) of battered women living in poverty.

However, the participants viewed racism as one of the biggest barriers for women of color to accessing and utilizing services. Much of the discussion centered on how racism and discrimination impact women of color's experiences with systems and their outcomes.

“Racism is a major issue for people in our community. Because of the mistrust of systems, many people will not access services outside of the community.”

These respondents had a very different view of how collaborations could be developed. They viewed the community as critical partners, if not the leaders, in developing services. Battered women from the community, community programs, organizations, businesses and members should have opportunities to be involved in the development of violence against women and children interventions.

“Our work should include capacity building for communities.”

Women from communities of color should have the option of being in an environment that is culturally comfortable for them while they heal. The sense of self is often tied to how one views herself/himself in relation to the world. For people of color, having a sense of culture, history, and knowing from whence they came can be very important to both their self-esteem and their healing process. Finding ways to strengthen community capacity to participate in service delivery and service development, and increasing the numbers of women of color in leadership roles are two strategies discussed by participants for working towards more culturally-relevant community-based services.

Institutionalized racism and discrimination were central themes raised throughout the project. The groups provided many examples of how institutionalized racism and discrimination impacted women from their communities when accessing and utilizing both child welfare services and domestic violence services. Participants also provided anecdotal information on how they have witnessed the systems working differently for white women.

“I just wrote down racism. They [white service providers] pathologize things that are unfamiliar. Lack of cultural competence is a major problem.”

Excessive child removal was one example participants used to illustrate institutional racism. Participants felt this was a huge concern for battered women from their communities.

“Being from a small community there is fear that people would find out – Fear that they would take their kids away”.

“I have seen cases where DSS has taken a child because a battered wife continues to talk to the batterer – pitiful.”

“At the state coalition, we hear things after the fact and I find that a lot of the times the kids are taken away and often the batterer gets custody. These proceedings often cost her all of her money because legal aid attorneys can’t really help.”

In many communities of color, a lack of resources to assist poor women of color with basic survival needs reinforces child removal. Currently, few programs are available to support women in maintaining their homes and families. And for women choosing to remain with their abuser, options are even more limited.

“Our approach is to have a woman leave her relationship. When families are struggling to survive and stay together with very little support, poor women’s and children’s basic survival needs are not met. Often they can’t leave and support their family and can’t stay and have supportive services to help them through the violence and get out of poverty.”

There are not enough services that follow a battered woman through becoming self-sufficient. Battered women may go to a shelter, call the police, but who helps if she and her children do not go to the shelter and the kids do not need to be removed? What if a battered woman, after receiving a restraining order, can no longer pay her rent, has a job but it is not enough to pay the bills? What if her abuser was her baby-sitter while she worked? What if she cannot speak English? Who assists her with finding a place to live, getting on her feet? Domestic violence programs are mostly crisis oriented. Once the immediate crisis is over, follow-up services are limited and, in some places, non-existent. Child welfare programs are designed to deal with abuse but not to assist families to stay intact and minimize and/or prevent abuse and neglect.

There are few options for keeping women and children in their own community where there might be some level of support and or strong connection. Family placement is one way to keep children connected to family, community and culture, as opposed to foster care where once children are in the system, they are often separated and placed with families outside of their community and culture. Family placements can also provide more support for the

woman as she is rebuilding her life. In 1999, only 26% of those in foster care were in relative placements³. Currently, there is little support for family placement. When family members are able to take in a battered woman's children until the woman gets on her feet, there is little or no support from the child welfare system. Families are left to figure out how to keep their families intact while supporting additional family members both financially and emotionally. When children are placed with relatives through the child protective service agency, those relatives must adhere to child protective services intervention but receive little or, in most cases, no monetary or other supports. However, if the children are removed by the child welfare system and placed in foster care, foster care providers are compensated financially and there are services available to the children.

Once children are in the system, women of color have to *"jump through too many hoops before getting their children back"*. At the Miami meeting, participants told many horror stories of women from their communities they had worked with whose children were removed, and once the woman got on her feet it still took her years to get her children back and some never did. In contrast, White women in same or similar situations didn't have their children removed or, if they did, regained custody sooner.

One example was a Vietnamese battered woman who appeared at a child protection custody hearing with no legal representation or interpreter. The woman did not speak English and did not understand that her five children were being removed; she did not have legal representation or an interpreter at the custody hearing. Once removed the children were separated and placed in foster homes, which took her hours to reach by bus. In order to visit her children, she spent entire days traveling back and forth to foster care homes, while she was also expected to obtain and maintain employment, learn English and find a suitable home for herself and her children. This woman's children have been in the system for over one year and are presently still there.

In another case, the shelter called the child welfare agency because in their state they automatically do this. This African-American woman had lived with her abusive boyfriend for three years. Once the child welfare worker arrived, she found the 2-year-old had bruises on his legs and arms. The woman admitted to the child welfare worker that her boyfriend beat him. The child welfare worker recommended removal of the three children and the woman agreed that it might be best for the children because she had no place to go when she left the shelter. After she left the shelter, she went to a homeless shelter and began to work on rebuilding her life. Even though she got a job and found an apartment, her children were not returned to her. It took over two years for her to get her children back.

Battered women from communities of color often do not know their rights and there is a lack of funds for adequate legal representation and or interpreters. As illustrated in the first example, women for whom English is not their first language often utilize systems without interpreters. They may appear in court, attend counseling, go to a shelter and interact all without proper interpretation. In addition, many women do not know their rights. Cases are often opened and no one ever really sits down with the woman and explains her rights or her options. When there is a language barrier, this is even less likely to happen.

In many cases, domestic violence and child welfare administrators and staff appear to lack sensitivity to the barriers racism and discrimination create for women from racial and ethnic

³ National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information, (2001), Foster Care National Statistics, Website publication.

communities and therefore do not address these issues when designing programs, assisting women in planning for self-sufficiency or figuring out how to keep her family intact.

“Now that we know the cultural differences, what are we to do with them? Dominant cultures acquire competence training rather than understand us. They use the information to provide services within their perception of what they perceive our culture to be.”

“The field is filled with stereotypes based on race/culture. How can they serve women who they have no respect for?”

Participants provided numerous examples of how women from their communities were provided with options that involved utilizing systems and, when they ran into racism, there was no advocacy or support to assist them in addressing it. Instead, often these women were viewed as the problem, labeled uncooperative and sometimes even violent.

“A lack of diversity in administrative staff...leads to traditional core services never changing.”

Participants discussed how their services had not changed to meet the needs of women from their community. Because most domestic violence programs are struggling with issues of cultural competency and outreach to communities of color, it is difficult for them to train staff on these issues or to provide staff with a broad analysis and tools with which to work in their communities. For women of color who are expected to work with their communities, this often translates into a lack of support for their work. Currently, a large gap exists between the numbers of white leaders and women of color leaders in the domestic violence and sexual assault fields. While there are more people of color in management in the child welfare system, a significant gap exists there as well.

There is little accountability for state domestic violence coalitions and local domestic violence programs or child welfare agencies to change their services to be more responsive to the needs of women and children from racial and ethnic communities. Programs can profess to serve everyone, but how do programs know if they are providing relevant services for everyone? What accountability measures exist to ensure this is occurring?

Few funds exist federally or at the state and local levels for culturally-specific programming.

“They are getting dollars for people who look like us but the services were not designed for us.”

“They try to squeeze us into a ‘one size fits all.’ The programs were created by people who don’t look like us.”

“When you’re looking at innovative approaches and when there are Latina, African-American, Native or Asian programs, these tend to be the least funded and then are the hardest hit.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

These and other racially-biased institutional practices were discussed often in conversation throughout the project. It is important to note here that WOCN recognizes that all of the situations discussed may not be attributed solely to race and racism. However, it is significant that the majority of those participating in this project perceived race to be one of the biggest factors in whether women from their community accessed services, particularly child protective services, and how they were treated when they accessed those services. Additionally, often their clients perceived racism as the determining factor in how their case was handled by both the domestic violence and the child welfare systems.

The re-occurring theme then became how domestic violence and child welfare agencies address and combat the barriers that institutional racism has created for many battered and assaulted women from racial and ethnic communities. Increasing women of color in leadership and involving the community in service development and delivery were the two that gained the most support from participants. Below is a sampling of the recommendations from the groups:

- ▶ The numbers of women of color in leadership in both the domestic violence and child welfare fields should increase to reflect the populations they serve.

“A lack of diversity in administrative staff...leads to traditional core services never changing.”

Participants stated that more women of color in leadership/decision-making roles would be a catalyst for different services, or services being delivered in a different way.

Participants also wanted to see more mentoring and other supports that develop women of color leadership. They wanted to see the emerging women of color leaders trained by people of color who have a track record of working with communities.

“[There is a need for] mentoring and leadership opportunities that are grounded in communities.”

Mentoring programs like the WOCNs could provide much needed support and tools to assist women of color activists in working more effectively to address domestic violence with their communities and at the same time build their leadership. The WOCN mentoring project provides women of color activists with leadership training and then these activists are paired with other women of color activist to provide long-term technical assistance on developing culturally-relevant programs. The same could be true for the child protective agencies. They too could benefit from programs that build the capacity of the people of color working in their agencies to more effectively work with communities of color and assume leadership roles.

- ▶ Services should be more holistic and integrate community services, domestic violence and child welfare services. Services should come from the community and be integrated into the community. The services should utilize and strengthen the informal networks, community services organizations and businesses where women frequent and go to for help such as extended family, church, beauty shops, community action organizations to support a battered woman through her crisis. One participant termed it as *“recreating the village.”*

One place to look for examples could be the more comprehensive wraparound services developed out of child welfare like Family Systems II, Inc., in Virginia – a program with woman of color leadership that uses an interdisciplinary approach and involves all of the systems needed to assist a child and family stabilize. For example, Family Systems II, Inc., works with the entire family and focuses on the family’s strengths. They use the Minuchin Model [structural family therapy], which is based on the underlying principle that focusing on the individual without working with the entire family system does not work. To that end, their therapists start from the very beginning of their work with a family, planning for that family’s discharge, by engaging all of the systems necessary to both bring about and sustain a change in that family. They work with any agency or individual that

needs to be involved, including community-based programs, church groups, schools, extended family, child protection, domestic violence programs, etc.

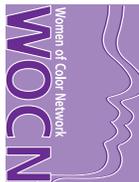
Another model is the elders' program developed by Kinaya Sokoya where African American families in the community are trained to provide support to other African American families in the community who are experiencing domestic violence. These trained families are called elders. As domestic violence and sexual assault service providers, we might explore how we can learn from and/or partner with these types of agencies to provide more holistic long-term services. In addition, our currently funded task forces, coalitions and coordinated responses could involve community representation.

- ▶ Funding should be earmarked for culturally-specific, community-based and women of color-lead programs.

“They are getting dollars for people who look like us but the services were not designed for us.”

As more women of color are trained to lead and their capacity to work more effectively with their communities increases, there also have to be dollars for them to develop programs. The current government funding sources could look at their current funding formulas and set up grant programs that are specifically for these types of programs.

- ▶ The participants suggested an instrument that provides benchmarks for domestic violence and child welfare agencies to assess the effectiveness of their services to women from racial and ethnic communities. This tool would help violence against women programs examine where their strengths and weaknesses are. WOCN would be willing to use its constituency to develop a set of benchmarks for such a tool. The tool could be used with state domestic violence coalitions, they in turn could use it with their member programs. Such a tool could be modified to include different benchmarks for child welfare agencies.
- ▶ Informal adoptions and placement by extended families should be recognized as legitimate and support should be provided. Families who take in relatives' children often need money, childcare, counseling and other supports to assist them in providing for the children. Child welfare agencies could look at how to divert some of the foster care money to relative placements or make TANF funds more accessible for this group.
- ▶ Participants felt that more emphasis should be placed on prevention. They would like to see additional programs addressing the issue of domestic violence and/or child abuse that work with families before there is a problem. After-school programs, in-school programs, faith-based programs, parenting programs and programs that work with males were just a few of the places they thought prevention efforts could occur.
- ▶ Poverty limits options for women with children. More supports like affordable housing/transitional housing, child care, transportation, legal services, employment development and job placement services are needed to assist women in ending the violence in their lives and becoming self-sufficient. Participants wanted to see more respite care programs that provide care for children while moms take care of business and do not involve women and children in the child welfare system. One participant provided an example: Her Native American program offers 24-hour childcare. When women are arrested [as is often the case in her community] in a domestic violence case, the children do not have to go to the child protective services agency and instead can be cared for until mom is released. It would be nice if such childcare were available for women in crisis. It would give them a chance to think about their situation, talk with a counselor and plan their next steps without the responsibility of children.
- ▶ Accountability programs in the community need to hold batterers accountable, while at the same time, provide him with services. Although this was a topic that came up often in the discussions, the participants did not provide any concrete examples of programs.



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